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# THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

## THE FAERY QUEEN<sup>1</sup>

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

It was the egregious Disraeli who dubbed Victoria "the Faery," and Mr. Lytton Strachey in his triumphant biography of the Queen elaborates the Spenserian allusion, with "its suggestion of a diminutive creature, endowed with magical—and mythical—properties, and a portentousness almost ridiculously out of keeping with the rest of her make-up." Mr. Strachey wonders rather naïvely whether or not the unabashed histrion smiled in his sleeve when, remembering another fairy queen, he wrote to Victoria thanking her for a gift of snowdrops, and told her of his fancy that "perhaps the gift came from another monarch: Queen Titania, gathering flowers, with her Court, in a soft and sea-girt isle, and sending magic blossoms, which, they say, turn the heads of those who receive them." Victoria and—Titania! Raw stuff, it would seem; but so far as we may judge from what Mr. Strachey tells us, Victoria swallowed it all without gagging; "like a dram-drinker," as he says, "whose ordinary life is passed in dull sobriety, her unsophisticated intelligence gulped down his rococo allurements with peculiar zest." Mr. Strachey's metaphors are slightly dissonant, but the testimony is definite and plain. Victoria, her Teutonic sentimentalism deliciously released, floated voluptuously upon these scented tides, not caring that the odor was musk and patchouli. When, at intervals, she came ashore and found her feet, even her appearance had changed. "The short, stout figure, with its folds of black velvet, its muslin streamers, its heavy pearls at the heavy neck, assumed an almost menacing air." In her curiously rodential countenance, with its small, projecting teeth, receding chin, and protruding eyes, the traces of disappointment and displeasure

<sup>1</sup> *Queen Victoria*. By Lytton Strachey. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co.

were now overlaid by lines of arrogance and hauteur. Dazzled by Disraeli's assurances that she was the greatest of mortal sovereigns, basking in the full realization of an imperial magnificence of which she had only dreamed, she dilated with a new and unconquerable will to power. When she was with Disraeli, the grotesque little body thrilled and fluttered with excitement, and Disraeli feared she was going to embrace him. "Wreathed in smiles, she tattled and glided about the room like a bird," he wrote to a friend. She showered the industrious sycophant with gifts—illustrated albums, primroses from the woods at Osborne—and his responsive ecstasies became almost uncontrollable. They "were more precious than rubies," these gifts from "the most loved and illustrious being, the Sovereign whom he adores." Yet Victoria, saved by her Teutonic fidelity to fact, kept her head, and signed herself, at the end of an official letter to her Prime Minister, "yours aff'ly V. R. and I." In such a phrase, as Mr. Strachey remarks, the deep reality of her feeling is instantly manifest: "The Faery's feet were on the solid earth; it was the *rusé* cynic who was in the air."

Nothing could be more admirable than Mr. Strachey's exhibition of Victoria in this most preposterous of her many preposterous relationships. It is typical of his performance throughout. The delicate justice of his attitude is beyond praise. He ignores a thousand opportunities for ridicule, for a devastating satire so tempting that it cannot have been easy to forego. His irony is exquisite, profound, delectable; his sense of comedy is rich and unflagging: but an inexhaustible magnanimity restrains him from unkindness, a sage and clairvoyant tolerance mellows the brilliance of his exposition.

He has confronted and triumphed over every provocation offered by his theme. He is content to show us, without parody, Victoria as a baby, extremely fat, and even then pious without difficulty; at six a queenly and Christian child; at thirteen, sincere and simple, affectionate, commonplace, resolutely good, "essentially middle-class, who might almost have been the daughter of a German pastor," able to praise with enthusiasm the Bishop of Chester's *Exposition of the Gospel of St. Matthew*.

She is eighteen, and we watch her get out of bed at 6 o'clock in

the morning of June 20, 1837, put on her dressing-gown, and go alone into the room where the Archbishop of Canterbury and Lord Conyngham, the Lord Chamberlain, were waiting to fall on their knees before her and tell her that she was Queen of England; and later, at her first Council in the Red Saloon, the great assembly of lords and notables, bishops, generals, Ministers of State, "saw the doors thrown open and a girl in deep plain mourning come into the room alone and move forward to her seat with extraordinary dignity and grace—an eighteen-year old Queen with fair hair, blue prominent eyes, a small, curved nose, an open mouth revealing the upper teeth, a tiny chin, a clear complexion . . . gravity, youth, composure; they heard a high unwavering voice reading aloud with perfect clarity; and then, the ceremony over, they saw the small figure rise and, with the same consummate grace, the same amazing dignity, pass out from among them, as she had come in, alone."

She was then at her most winsome. In Mr. Strachey's remarkable projection she becomes increasingly less persuasive—her coarseness of mental grain, her incurable mediocrity, her spiritual obtuseness, her narrowness and crude intolerance, her infinite sentimentalism, are more and more deeply etched. We observe her raptures, two years later, over the pulchritude of Albert—his "exquisite nose," his "delicate moustachios and slight but very slight whiskers." They embrace, and he is "so kind, so affectionate," as he murmurs to her that he will be very happy "*das Leben mit dir zu zubringen*." She marries her enamoring German cousin, who was born in the same year as she, and whose birth had been assisted by the same midwife. They are miraculously happy; they visit Albert's fatherland, and Victoria expatiates, in a letter to her mentor Leopold, upon her affection for "our dear little Germany . . . I fear I almost like it too much." Albert plays with the royal babies, designs a new pigsty, reads aloud to Victoria the *Church History of Scotland*, shows her how she should behave when she appears in public places. We see him playing a more and more dominating part in the affairs of England, assuming the actual control of the forces and the functions of the Crown, so that by the close of Peel's administration he had become, in effect, another one of

England's German kings. We witness the triumph of nineteenth-century duty, industry, morality, domesticity, over eighteenth-century subtlety and cynicism; with "even the chairs and tables assuming the forms of prim solidity." We note the apogee of the Victorian Age.

Palmerston, Gladstone, Disraeli, cross the stage, inimitably realized. Albert Edward is born—alas! that Mr. Strachey tells us so little of him (we beseech from him a book, at least an essay, upon Edward VII). What we see of him is not easily forgettable. "Bertie, though he was good-humored and gentle, seemed to display a deep-seated repugnance to every form of mental exertion. . . . The more lessons that Bertie had to do, the less he did them; and the more carefully he was guarded against excitement and frivolities, the more desirous of mere amusement he seemed to become. . . . Certainly the Prince of Wales did not take after his father. . . . On his seventeenth birthday a memorandum was drawn up over the names of the Queen and Prince informing their eldest son that he was now entering upon the period of manhood, and directing him henceforward to perform the duties of a Christian gentleman. . . . 'Life is composed of duties,' said the memorandum, 'and in the due, punctual, and cheerful performance of them, the true Christian, true soldier, true gentleman, is recognized. . . .' On receipt of the memorandum Bertie burst into tears."

The Prince Consort dies at forty-two, and a long darkness falls upon Victoria's career. With the passing of Albert, a veil descends. "Only occasionally, at fitful and disconnected intervals, does it lift for a moment or two. . . . Thus, though the Queen survived her great bereavement for almost as many years as she had lived before it, the chronicle of those years can bear no proportion to the tale of her earlier life." But the veil lifts at intervals. We see Victoria absorbed in the holy task of evolving a suitable monument for her dead consort, and achieving the ineffable Albert Memorial, with its central figure of the adored Prince under the starry canopy,—designed by Mr. Foley, but inspired, in one particular, by Mr. Gilbert Scott, who chose the sitting posture for the figure "as best conveying the idea of dignity befitting a royal personage." The statue, of bronze gilt,

weighs nearly ten tons. "It was rightly supposed that the simple word *Albert*, cast on the base," murmurs Mr. Strachey, "would be a sufficient means of identification."

Victoria, no longer guided by Albert, tackles affairs of state. She considers the intricate Irish Church Bill, yet can make nothing of its complexities except to be sure that she disapproves it. She obtains relief by diverting her attention to a suggested naval reform. It had been proposed that the sailors should thenceforward be allowed to wear beards. Victoria is favorably inclined toward this innovation. "Her own personal feeling," writes the Sovereign to the First Lord, "would be for the beards without the moustaches, as the latter have rather a soldier-like appearance; but then the object in view would not be obtained, viz., to prevent the necessity of shaving. Therefore it had better be as proposed, the entire beard, only it should be kept short and very clean. . . . On no account should moustaches be allowed without beards."

The Prince of Wales becomes one of "her more serious distresses." He had begun to do as he liked, and in 1870 "her worst fears seemed to be justified when he appeared as a witness in a society divorce case. Victoria was indignant—less with her son than with the social system. She wrote to Mr. Delane of *The Times* requesting him to write frequently 'articles pointing out the *immense* danger and evil of the wretched frivolity and levity of the views and lives of the Higher Classes.'" It is a pity that the Queen could not live to read Col. Repington. It might have reconciled her to Edward's associates.

The veil lifts more often now. Victoria is white-haired, and walks with a stick. Disraeli and John Brown are dead. The fiftieth year of her reign is celebrated with pomp and gorgeousness, and she is hailed by her people as "the embodied symbol of their imperial greatness." Victoria, escorted by kings and princes, drives to Westminster Abbey and gives thanks to God and the dead Disraeli. She is tired, but almost happy again. The sharp edge of her grief has blunted, and she can enjoy her breakfast without wondering how "dear Albert" would have liked the buttered eggs. But she is still an inexorable memorialist, a faithful attendant at secret shrines, a passionate observer of

holy rites. At this period, every bed in which she slept had attached to it, at the back, on the right-hand side above the pillows, a photograph of Albert's head and shoulders as he lay dead, surmounted by a wreath of immortelles; and in the suite of rooms which he had occupied at the Castle, his clothing, by her command, was laid afresh each evening upon the bed; and each evening the water was set ready in the basin, as if he were still alive: "this incredible rite," says Mr. Strachey, "was performed with scrupulous regularity for nearly forty years."

It is a large element of Mr. Strachey's triumph that he makes such ghastliness as this seem an organic and not too horrible part of his superbly modulated portrait. He displays Victoria with completeness but without cruelty. He is benignly caustic, bountiful and exact, profoundly humorous and inclusive, infinitely exhilarating. He discerns the nature of the underlying element which, in Victoria's personality, really counted: "It was a peculiar sincerity. Her truthfulness, her singlemindedness, the vividness of her emotions and her unrestrained expression of them, were the varied forms which this central characteristic assumed. It was her sincerity which gave her at once her impressiveness, her charm, and her absurdity. She moved through life with the imposing certitude of one to whom concealment was impossible—either towards her surroundings or towards herself. There she was, all of her—the Queen of England, complete and obvious; the world might take her or leave her; she had nothing more to show, or to explain, or to modify; and, with her peerless carriage, she swept along her path."

Four years after the culminating public occasion of her career, the Jubilee of 1897, she died at Osborne, in her eighty-second year. Mr. Strachey fancies her calling up out of the past, as she lay blind and silent in those last days, the drifting shadows of her marvellous history, summoning them one by one,—“passing back and back, through the cloud of years, to older and ever older memories: to the spring woods at Osborne, so full of prim-roses for Lord Beaconsfield; to Lord Palmerston's queer clothes and high demeanor, and Albert's face under the green lamp, and Albert's first stay at Balmoral, and Albert in his blue and silver uniform, and the Baron coming in through a doorway, and Lord

M. dreaming at Windsor with the rooks cawing in the trees, and the Archbishop of Canterbury on his knees in the dawn, and the old King's turkey-cock ejaculations, and Uncle Leopold's soft voice at Claremont, and Lehzen with the globes, and her mother's feathers sweeping down towards her, and a great old repeater-watch of her father's in its tortoise-shell case, and a yellow rug, and some friendly flounces of sprigged muslin, and the trees and the grass at Kensington."

And so Mr. Strachey, with this charming coda, comes to the end of a dazzling exhibition of bravura. In his field, he is an unequalled virtuoso. We can think of no living writer of English who could have yielded us, in this particular adventure, so memorable a parade of beauty, of entertainment, of slyly dissembled malice—unless it is Mr. Max Beerbohm. But Mr. Beerbohm would infallibly have avoided even the one little pitfall that has entrapped Mr. Strachey and kept him from attaining complete distinction: Mr. Beerbohm would never have been betrayed into using that appalling *cliché* invoked by Mr. Strachey when he tells us, in the idiom of the "local item" and the suburban tea, that the Prince Consort was "passionately fond of music."

LAWRENCE GILMAN: